News
Ministry



Sr. Anu Maniamkot of the Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, right, gives Communion to an elderly woman during Mass at the Canadian Martyrs Nangina Parish Dec. 25, 2020, in Funyula, Kenya. She works as a nurse at Holy Family Nangina hospital that was previously administered by Sr. Marianna Hulshof. (Doreen Ajiambo)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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Funyula, Kenya — April 12, 2021

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Jennifer Nerima arrived at Busia County Referral Hospital on the morning of March 15 with no time to waste. Her infant was on the way.

An obstetrician dashed inside the delivery room and helped deliver the baby girl. To honor a religious sister who dedicated much of her life to educating poor and orphaned children in the region, Nerima named her daughter Marianna, after the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof, a Medical Mission sister from the Netherlands.

"I promised myself that when I give birth to a baby girl I will name her after the nun who changed my life forever," said the 34-year-old mother, who also has two boys, ages 8 and 5. "I was an orphan, and I had no one to assist me get an education but Marianna came to my rescue. She was a kind woman and compassionate."

Nerima, an accountant, is among some 10,000 people in Funyula, a rural area of western Kenya, who received an education scholarship from Hulshof through primary to secondary and finally to middle and university colleges in Kenya.

Hulshof died 14 years ago, but her family, friends and devotees haven't forgotten her. April 12 marks her 100th birthday. During the special day, her family and congregation in the Netherlands plan to gather and honor her. In Kenya, those she served wish to do the same to remember her good deeds.



Sr. Marianna Hulshof, a member of the Medical Mission Sisters, is pictured an undated photo. (Courtesy of Canadian Martyrs Nangina Parish)

"It's a very special day for me, and not just because it is her birthday, but because it reminds me of a selfless servant who was sent by God to save the lives of the poor people in this region," said Nerima. "I will be visiting poor villages and orphanages on her birthday to share food and gifts with the orphans. I will never forget her good work."

Hulshof changed the lives of many members of the Samia people, the tribe that makes up most of the population in Funyula, an area of about 115,000 people. Her work touched almost every aspect of life in the area: In addition to awarding scholarships, she built homes for the poor, taught locals how to improve agricultural methods, and improved health care.

In every village in the region, mothers have named their babies in honor of the sister. Several institutions, including schools, hospitals and orphanages in the region, have also been named after her. Many residents refer to her as St. Marianna, though she wasn't a saint, and others have hung her portraits on their house walls to remind them about her legacy.

"I can simply say she was a real miracle sent to us from God. She served people selflessly regardless of where they came from or even their religious background,"Hon. Wilberforce Mudenyo, a legislator representing Funyula residents, told Global Sisters Report.



Wilberforce Mudenyo, a legislator representing Funyula residents, is reviving projects that were initiated by the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof. (Doreen Ajiambo)

"She helped my two brothers through school, and now one is a successful quantity surveyor and the other is a renowned lawyer. She really changed the fortunes of many people in this area," he said.

Eric Ngala, who is now ministering at Africa Inland Church in Kenya worked with Hulshof for six years in Funyula as social worker. He visited her in the Netherlands a few days before she died on Jan. 11, 2008.

"She was one great person, and I don't think there ever will be [another like her]," he said. Ngala wrote a biography of Hulshof after visiting her in the Netherlands. "She did so many things that I don't think anyone could do, her kindness and humanity was just godly."

The father of three told GSR that he asked Hulshof to describe herself in one word, and she responded, "I'm a healer." When he further asked her about the secret of her success, Hulshof answered, "not my success, but the Lord enabled me. I also involved the people in everything I did, not forgetting commitment and perseverance."



Pastor Eric Ngala, a social worker, worked with the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof to improve the lives of the Samia people in Funyula, a small rural area in western Kenya. (Doreen Ajiambo)

Other sisters said she left a commendable mark that they haven't been able to replace. "Marianna is just irreplaceable, the way she changed every aspect of peoples' lives in this region can never be done by anybody else," said Sr. Lydia Inya, a member of Sisters of Mary of Kakamega. She worked in the same parish as Hulshof, in a different ministry.

Hulshof's ministry

Hulshof was born in Ootmarsum village in the eastern part of Holland in a family of 11 children. She told Ngala in an interview that her a relative was a cardinal and was a source of encouragement for her to start working for the disadvantaged quite early in life.

As a trained nurse, Hulshof began her ministry as a sister at the age of 25 when she was first posted to Jordan. She worked there for five years in a hospital as a dietician. During that time, she received recognition from the king of Jordan for her work.

From Jordan, she was posted in Malawi from 1961 to 1964, before moving to Kenya in 1970. She immediately enrolled at Kenya School of Government to pursue a course in public administration to acquire necessary skills before going to Funyula, where she became the administrator of Holy Family Nangina Mission Hospital.

She realized people in Funyula, predominantly of the Samia tribe, were suffering from much more than just normal illnesses. There was extreme poverty to the extent that people could not afford medical bills, and some were even admitted in the hospital due to starvation, she told Ngala.



Sr. Lydia Inya of Sisters of Mary of Kakamega distributes wheat flour, rice, sugar and vegetable oil to the old age people in Funyula, a small rural area in western Kenya – some 275 miles northwest of Nairobi, the country's capital city. Inya was close to Sr. Marianna Hulshof, who helped fight poverty in the region for more than 30 years by providing education, building houses, distributing food and improving health care. Hulshof died on Jan. 11, 2008. (Doreen Ajiambo)

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This prompted her to look for ways of helping people out of poverty. She started an outreach program, visiting people at their homes to get a more complete understanding of the situation.

But one day, an incident shocked her, according to Ngala. During a visit to families in the area, the nun broke down in tears when she saw a family spend the night out in the cold after their grass thatched house was torched and the property destroyed following a domestic quarrel.

"She was deeply moved by compassion and thought of doing something that would involve the community directly," said Ngala. "She thought of ways to end poverty in the region and she decided to invest in long term projects as lasting solutions to poverty."

Hulshof left her job as a hospital administrator to start the Nangina Family Helper Project in 1988 to assist families and poor children access education as a way of ending poverty.

She built several schools and launched a campaign aimed to bring education opportunities to thousands of children. Ngala said Hulshof used to get support and funding from her friends in the Netherlands.

Bernard Okotch, a teacher at Bukhuma Primary School who benefitted from her education program, said he always feels nostalgic whenever someone mentions the sister's name. He met Hulshof in 2000 when he had completed eighth grade but had no money for secondary school. During that time, Hulshof was conducting home visits looking for children who had performed well in their eighth grade final exams but were not able to proceed with their education.

"The first time I met Marianna, I was not going to school due to lack of school fees," said the 36-year-old father of two. "She talked to my parents and requested me to give her the results of my Grade 8 exams. She was surprised at the way I had performed and agreed to pay for my school fees."



Bernard Okotch, who is now a teacher, is a beneficiary of Nangina Family Helper Project that was run by the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof to help the poor people in Funyula, Kenya. (Doreen Ajiambo)

"She made me who I am. I would be nowhere without her help," added Okotch. Okotch said the nun also built brick houses for widows and poor families. "I surely do miss her. I will never forget her kindness, and may her soul rest in peace."

For those who had already dropped out of school due to lack of school fees or could not proceed to secondary school or college, the sister had another plan. She started a youth polytechnic school to offer them the opportunity to acquire skills for gainful employment.The school offered training in sewing, tailoring, plumbing, masonry, carpentry, welding and electrical mechanism, according to Fredrick Wandera Oseno, a local chief administrator of the region who worked with Hulshof.

Oseno said that the people of the Samia tribe will forever be grateful to the late Hulshof.

"When you visit these villages now, you'll realize that almost everyone who is in formal employment is a product of Sister Marianna's education project," he said, noting that the region has over 120 professors, most of whom are beneficiaries of the sister's scholarships. "Marianna saved our region from poverty. A majority of families right now are able to take their children to school because of the sister's help."



Fr. Fredrick Ojilong of the Canadian Martyrs Nangina Parish blesses wheat flour, rice, sugar and vegetable oil that was distributed to the elderly on Dec. 25, 2020, in Funyula, Kenya. This Mass tradition was started by Sr. Marianna Hulshof. (Doreen Ajiambo)

Hulshof's work revived

At the age of 80 and having worked in Kenya for more than 30 years, Hulshof became sick and was treated in a Nairobi hospital. However, the doctors advised her to return to the Netherlands for better medical care. When she left, most of her projects came to a halt and collapsed due to lack of funds and poor management.

However, Mudenyo is now collaborating with the church to revive Hulshof's projects. Currently the polytechnic under her the name has been reopened, and 146 students from the local community are able to study and acquire skills for free

"We are now working towards the revival of Sister Marianna's projects," said Mudenyo, urging donors from elsewhere to help. "We want our people to be self-sustained and be able to acquire skills that can better their lives. That was Marianna's dream, to see poverty being eradicated."

Fr. Fredrick Ojilong, the presiding priest at Nangina parish where Hulshof's offices were located, said the church begun reviving her projects in 2019. "We already have a project of providing food aid to the old people, widows and orphans. The church is also sponsoring orphan and needy children to access education," he said.

Some of the beneficiaries are also willing to help others to proceed with their education and better their lives.

"Sister Marianna taught us the importance of giving — therefore when given the opportunity I would also donate towards the same," said Nerima. "I am happy that the polytechnic has been reopened and many people are going to be empowered just like me."



Left: One of the houses that were built by the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof in mid-1980's, back when grass-thatched houses were the norm even for the middle class of the society. A permanent house for the old, sick and widowed was thus a treasure. (Courtesy of Canadian Martyrs Nangina Parish); Right: A signpost of the technical college named after the late Sr. Marianna Hulshof where she is referred to as St. Marianna. To the people of this region she is often referred to as saint and some people have even named children after her. (Doreen Ajiambo)



Sr. Marianna Hulshof, center, was trained nurse who began her ministry as a sister at the age of 25 when she was first posted to Jordan. (Courtesy of Canadian Martyrs Nangina Parish)